Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation
Water Resources Division
Water Rights Bureau

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
For Routine Actions with Limited Environmental Impact

Part I. Proposed Action Description

1. Applicant/Contact name and address: SWEET GRASS CONSERVATION DISTRICT
PO BOX 749
BIG TIMBER, MT 59011

2. Type of action: Conservation District Change Application 43B 30108781

3. Water source name: Yellowstone River

4. Location affected by project: Sections 2 and 3, T1S, R13E, Sweet Grass County.

5. Narrative summary of the proposed project, purpose, action to be taken, and benefits: The Applicant proposes to authorize the producer (David Chesnoff) to use 2.2 CFS up to 254 AF/year of the Sweet Grass Conservation District water reservation. The water would be used to sprinkle irrigate 107 acres in NW Section 2 and Section 3, T1S, R13E, Sweet Grass County. The benefit would be to allow the Conservation District to fulfill its obligation to provide water for future irrigation projects. The DNRC shall issue a change authorization if an applicant proves the criteria in 85-2-402 MCA are met.

6. Agencies consulted during preparation of the Environmental Assessment:
(include agencies with overlapping jurisdiction)

United States Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service
Montana Natural Heritage Program
United State Fish and Wildlife Service
Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks
Montana Department of Environmental Quality

Part II. Environmental Review

1. Environmental Impact Checklist:

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

WATER QUANTITY, QUALITY AND DISTRIBUTION

Water quantity **-** *Assess whether the source of supply is identified as a chronically or periodically dewatered stream by DFWP. Assess whether the proposed use will worsen the already dewatered condition.*

Determination: No significant impact.
This stretch of the Yellowstone River between Springdale and the confluence with the Bighorn River is considered a periodically dewatered stream by the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks. The proposed use will have little effect on the dewatering because it appropriates water only during times of relatively high flow.

Water quality **-** *Assess whether the stream is listed as water quality impaired or threatened by DEQ, and whether the proposed project will affect water quality.*

Determination: No significant impact.
This stretch of the Yellowstone River is listed as Class 4C which means identified threats or impairments result from pollution categories such as dewatering or habitat modification. Its beneficial use support information shows that it is not fully supporting aquatic life while agriculture, primary contact recreation and drinking water uses were not assessed. Probable cause for impairment lists alteration in stream-side or littoral vegetative covers and physical substrate habitat alterations due to loss of riparian habitat and site clearance such as land development and streambank modifications/destabilization. This application is for agricultural use on land that is already actively farmed and would not degrade the water quality in terms of site clearance or streambank modifications. This project will use high efficiency center pivot sprinklers and medium efficiency wheel line sprinklers. High efficiency projects decrease the potential for degradation of water quality, because there is little to no return flow.

Groundwater **-** *Assess if the proposed project impacts ground water quality or supply. If this is a groundwater appropriation, assess if it could impact adjacent surface water flows.*

Determination: No impact
The project uses surface water for irrigation and will not adversely affect groundwater.

DIVERSION WORKS - *Assess whether the means of diversion, construction and operation of the appropriation works of the proposed project will impact any of the following: channel impacts, flow modifications, barriers, riparian areas, dams, well construction.*

Determination: No significant impact.
The diversion works will take water using a centrifugal pump powered by an electric motor coupled with the pump. The primary diversion will be placed on a section of riverbank that is primarily gravel. From the river pump, water will be conveyed through 6 and 8 inch buried pipe to the pivots and wheel line. The Applicant is expected to ensure they have all the required permits to construct the diversion works and conveyance facilities. There should be no impact to the channel, no modification of flow, no barriers, dams or wells and no impact to riparian areas.

UNIQUE, ENDANGERED, FRAGILE OR LIMITED ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES

Endangered and threatened species **-** *Assess whether the proposed project will impact any threatened or endangered fish, wildlife, plants or aquatic species or any "species of special concern," or create a barrier to the migration or movement of fish or wildlife. For groundwater,*

assess whether the proposed project, including impacts on adjacent surface flows, would impact any threatened or endangered species or "species of special concern."

Determination: No significant impact.
The Montana Natural Heritage Program lists the Grizzly Bear, Golden Eagle, Bald Eagle, Veery, and Yellowstone Cutthroat Trout as species of concern or special status species. There are no threatened or endangered species in the area. The Small Yellow Lady's Slipper is listed as a plant species of potential concern. The Golden and Bald Eagles are protected under the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act of 1940. The Applicant consulted with the Montana Sage Grouse Habitat Conservation Program prior to submitting this application. The Program has not provided any stipulations for the project which is located within General Habitat for sage-grouse. The proposed activities are consistent with the Montana Sage Grouse Conservation Strategy. This proposed use of water should have no impact on these species as the project area is already actively farmed.

Wetlands **-** *Consult and assess whether the apparent wetland is a functional wetland (according to COE definitions), and whether the wetland resource would be impacted.*

Determination: No significant impact.
There will be no new disturbances of any wetland areas near this project.

Ponds **-** *For ponds, consult and assess whether existing wildlife, waterfowl, or fisheries resources would be impacted.*

Determination: Not applicable.
There are no ponds involved in this proposal.

GEOLOGY/SOIL QUALITY, STABILITY AND MOISTURE - *Assess whether there will be degradation of soil quality, alteration of soil stability, or moisture content. Assess whether the soils are heavy in salts that could cause saline seep.*

Determination: No Significant Impact
The dominant soils in the area are Beaverell very cobbly loam. These soils are deep, well drained soils that are nonsaline to very slightly saline. There should be no saline seep as a result of this project.

VEGETATION COVER, QUANTITY AND QUALITY/NOXIOUS WEEDS - *Assess impacts to existing vegetative cover. Assess whether the proposed project would result in the establishment or spread of noxious weeds.*

Determination: No significant impact.
The area of this project has been used for agriculture in the past and has no native vegetative cover. Installation of the sprinkler systems, pipes and pump may provide an opportunity for spread of weeds. It will be the responsibility of the property owner to monitor and control weeds.

AIR QUALITY - *Assess whether there will be a deterioration of air quality or adverse effects on vegetation due to increased air pollutants.*

Determination: No impact.

The project is for sprinkler and gated pipe flood irrigation of agricultural land and will not impact air quality.

HISTORICAL AND ARCHEOLOGICAL SITES - *Assess whether there will be degradation of unique archeological or historical sites in the vicinity of the proposed project if it is on State or Federal Lands. If it is not on State or Federal Lands simply state NA-project not located on State or Federal Lands.*

Determination: Not applicable
The project is not located on State of Federal Lands.

DEMANDS ON ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES OF LAND, WATER, AND ENERGY - *Assess any other impacts on environmental resources of land, water and energy not already addressed.*

Determination: None recognized.

HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

LOCALLY ADOPTED ENVIRONMENTAL PLANS AND GOALS - *Assess whether the proposed project is inconsistent with any locally adopted environmental plans and goals.*

Determination: There are no known locally adopted environmental plans or goals.

ACCESS TO AND QUALITY OF RECREATIONAL AND WILDERNESS ACTIVITIES - *Assess whether the proposed project will impact access to or the quality of recreational and wilderness activities.*

Determination: No impact.
The area is and has been historically used for agriculture. There are no nearby recreational or wilderness areas.

HUMAN HEALTH - *Assess whether the proposed project impacts on human health.*

Determination: No impact
The project is for sprinkler irrigation of agricultural land.

PRIVATE PROPERTY - *Assess whether there are any government regulatory impacts on private property rights.*
*Yes___ No__**X**_ If yes, analyze any alternatives considered that could reduce, minimize, or eliminate the regulation of private property rights.*

Determination: Not applicable.

OTHER HUMAN ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES - *For routine actions of limited environmental impact, the following may be addressed in a checklist fashion.*

Impacts on:

(a) *Cultural uniqueness and diversity?* No significant impact.

(b) *Local and state tax base and tax revenues?* No significant impact.

(c) *Existing land uses?* No significant impact.

(d) *Quantity and distribution of employment?* No significant impact.

(e) *Distribution and density of population and housing?* No significant impact.

(f) *Demands for government services?* No significant impact.

(g) *Industrial and commercial activity?* No significant impact.

(h) *Utilities?* No significant impact.

(i) *Transportation?* No significant impact.

(j) *Safety?* No significant impact.

(k) *Other appropriate social and economic circumstances?* No significant impact.

2. ***Secondary and cumulative impacts on the physical environment and human population:***

Secondary Impacts: No secondary impacts of this project were recognized.

Cumulative Impacts: There is one pending application and no non-perfected permits issued in this area. This project does not appear to pose any cumulative adverse impacts.

3. ***Describe any mitigation/stipulation measures:*** None

4. ***Description and analysis of reasonable alternatives to the proposed action, including the no action alternative, if an alternative is reasonably available and prudent to consider:*** The only alternative to the project as proposed is a no action alternative. The no action alternative would have no impacts. However the no action alternative denies the conservation district and the producer the benefit of irrigation.

PART III. Conclusion

1. Preferred Alternative: Issue a change authorization if applicant proves the criteria in 85.2.402 MCA are met.

2 Comments and Responses: None

3. *Finding:*
*Yes___ No_**X**__ Based on the significance criteria evaluated in this EA, is an EIS required?*

If an EIS is not required, explain why the EA is the appropriate level of analysis for this proposed action: No significant adverse impacts associated with the project were identified. Therefore an EA is the appropriate level of investigation and an EIS is not required.

Name of person(s) responsible for preparation of EA:

Name: Christine Schweigert
Title: Water Resources Specialist
Date: 12/06/2016